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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001280

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/07/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)  
SUBJECT: CODEL HASTINGS PRESSES ALGERIA ON ELECTION  
OBSERVERS

REF: A. ALGIERS 1194  
[1](#)B. ALGIERS 1208

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Representative Alcee Hastings (D-FL) urged that Algeria invite international observers for the April 2009 presidential elections. He met with positive but carefully hedged responses from his Algerian government interlocutors. The parliamentarians he met were generally warm to the idea, and the vice president of the National Popular Assembly (APN) even promised to draft an invitation for Rep. Hastings to return in April as an observer, although he admitted it would have to be approved by "those in power."

The Minister for Parliamentary Relations was more confrontational on the issue, but pointed out that the three ruling coalition parties had nothing to be afraid of, and had already issued a statement following a congress earlier in the week that they did not object to international observers.

END SUMMARY.

OBSERVERS ADD CREDIBILITY

[1](#)2. (C) Rep. Hastings met with Algerian parliamentary leaders on December 2 as part of a trip through the Maghreb. He told his interlocutors that he was in the region in his capacity as a representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to hear from parliamentarians on issues facing the region and to report his findings to the president of the OSCE parliamentary assembly. But Hastings also used his meetings as a platform to press the Algerians to invite international observers to the country for the April 2009 presidential elections. At each meeting he recounted how he had been an election observer in over a dozen countries, including lead observer in seven of them, and that he had personally convinced then-Secretary of State Colin Powell in 2004 to lift the ban on international observers in the U.S. Consequently, he said, there were 80 international parliamentarians observing the 2008 U.S. elections in November, including 12 in his home state of Florida. Hastings reassured his Algerian interlocutors that he was not being critical of Algerian processes, telling the president of the APN (the lower house of parliament) as well as the Minister for Parliamentary Relations that having observers simply adds credibility to the process.

TRUST, WHY VERIFY?

13. (C) Abdelaziz Ziari, president of the APN and a ruling FLN party loyalist, told Hastings that election monitoring has existed in Algeria since 1996. He explained that candidates may send their own observers to polling stations, and small parties can ask for assistance if they don't have enough people to cover all the polls they wish to monitor. He noted that the improved security situation since 1990s has allowed for better organization and administration of elections throughout the nation, and that reports of recent elections had been positive. He added, "we expect perfect transparency" in April.

14. (C) Ziari said international observers would be welcomed to Algeria for the April election, but that they must respect Algerian sovereignty and election rules. He also said that "where pluralism is new, losers often claim fraud," referring to small parties who cannot afford to monitor all polling stations. This theme was repeated by Minister for Parliamentary Relations Mahmoud Khedri, who took a defensive tone in his meeting with Hastings and linked election monitoring with unfounded claims of election fraud. Khedri said "many parties justify their election failures by claiming fraud." Nonetheless, he noted, the three ruling coalition parties, who met days before for the purpose of formally asking President Bouteflika to run for reelection, had stated that they had no objection to international observers for the April election. Khedri added, however, that of the opposition parties, only the Kabylie-based National Democratic Rally (RCD) has called for international observers.

ALGIERS 00001280 002 OF 002

15. (C) Khedri went on to suggest that logistics would negate the utility of international observers. Khedri asked "How many should we have? Five hundred? Five thousand?" He noted that there are 53,000 polling stations in Algeria, making it impossible to cover them all. Khedri said, "the best guarantee of transparency is in the hands of the parties and the people," referring to Ziari's comment that political parties have the right to post monitors at any polling station.

SEE YOU IN APRIL, INSH'ALLAH  
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16. (C) Hastings challenged Khedri's suggestion that claims of election fraud are often simply the frustrated complaints of small parties who lose elections. Hastings sat forward in his chair as he recounted his experiences during the 2000 U.S. presidential elections, and the fraud that he said he knew took place in his home state of Florida. "My party was in the minority at the time, and I am here to tell you that fraud took place, and it was not just in my mind." Hastings told Khedri that shortly thereafter, while acting as an international election observer, a Russian asked why the Representative could monitor Russian elections but the reverse was not possible. This drove Hastings to ask Secretary Powell to repeal the ban on international observers in the U.S, which Hastings said Powell later told him "was the absolute right thing to do."

17. (C) Hastings then refuted Khedri's claim that having a large number of polling stations makes an international observer exercise meaningless. He pointed out that there are "far more than 53,000 polling stations in the United States," but that international observers are now part of the election process -- including, he added for emphasis, five Russian parliamentarians who came to his district and witnessed his reelection on November 4. Hastings appealed to Khedri to encourage the government to invite international observers to the next presidential election, concluding, "Insh'allah (God willing), I'll be back in April." Seddik Chiheb, an APN vice president who accompanied Hastings to all of his government meetings, met the Congressman at the airport upon his departure and said privately, "I will draft an invitation for

you to come back in April; but of course, I'll have to send it through the powers that be for approval."

18. (C) COMMENT: As we have reported in reftels, opposition to the constitutional revision and a possible Bouteflika third term has been loud in the press. The three ruling parties - FLN, RND and MSP - have nonetheless formed an official "presidential alliance" and publicly called for Bouteflika to run again in April. Hastings was blunt with his Algerian hosts on the need for international observers. While none of them were enthusiastic about international observers, all were at some pains to keep the door to the idea open. Even Minister Khedri eventually beat a retreat in the face of Hastings' strong riposte, asserting that there was really no big disagreement. The ruling alliance had nothing to fear. That's exactly right, Hastings agreed. End Comment.

19. (U) Representative Hastings did not clear this cable before his departure.  
PEARCE